

Employment on Sugar Plantations in Hawaii and Puerto Rico as an Incentive of Social Change in the 19th and 20th Century: the Past and Present Influence of the White Sweetener

Alicja Mazek
BA student

Attention to sugar as a factor shaping various spheres of life began in the 1980s with Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power*, which describes the correlations between sugar, slavery, imperialism and class differences. Ever since its publication in 1985, various studies have been held to establish the importance of sugar in particular countries or regions of the world. Among those places are Hawaii and Puerto Rico, islands located on two opposite sides of the mainland, whose interaction with the US is inextricably linked to sugarcane plantations and their development.

Indeed, it is not an overstatement to say that Hawaii and Puerto Rico have been shaped and influenced by the production of sugar. What is more, the production itself was also a significant stimulus for social change in the 19th and 20th century. As the act of searching employment among plantation workers transformed their respective history, economy and, consequently, social structure, the phenomena such as migration and multiculturalism emerged. Thus, the sweetener contributed to the diversification of the Hawaiian society, whereas in Puerto Rico, it destroyed the previously established social structure and induced mass migration, which limited the island's economic, social and cultural development.

An overview of the social situation before the establishment of sugar plantations is crucial to acknowledge the scale of the changes induced by sugar. In Hawaii, sugarcane was an almost unknown crop until the end of the 18th century, when it was brought to the islands and popularized by Christian missionaries ("Hawai'i: The Legacy of Sugar"). At that time, Hawaii was inhabited by approximately 250 000 people, mostly Native Hawaiians of Polynesian descent. Until the 1840s, the main source of their income was Pacific trade (Schmitt 7; MacLennan 5), then Hawaiians also profited from whaling and the sale of sandalwood (LaCroix 4). They were almost completely isolated from the Western world until the 1830s, when American businessmen became interested in the establishment of sugar mills and plantations on the islands ("Hawai'i: The Legacy of Sugar"). The development of the industry marked the end of a homogenous

society and the Native Hawaiian dominance, as the influx of foreign workers led to the creation of a unique cultural hybrid.

On the contrary, Puerto Rico's indigenous people, the Taíno, had almost disappeared under the Spanish rule centuries earlier, before the introduction and development of sugar plantations. However, the sweetener contributed to yet another change in the island's population. At the end of the 18th century, Puerto Rico's society had been "composed of deserters from the military services, survivors of shipwrecks, colonists en route to the mainland (...); was mainly of European origin and was almost entirely free" (Mintz 276). The cultivation of sugar, initiated in 1815 under the Spanish rule after the *Cédula de Gracias* and later developed by Americans, contributed to the flattening of the social structure. Initially, local slaves were employed, but soon people of all classes were required to work and, consequently, deprived of their personal freedom (277). According to Mintz, "the rise of the plantation system degraded slave and freeman alike", changing the previously rich society into a working mass with few rights (280).

The aforementioned enrichment of the Hawaiian society began in the 1850s, when the plantation owners failed to employ enough workers, as locals were decimated by previously unknown diseases brought by the possessors themselves. In order to address this issue, employment possibilities were advertised and contract labourers were brought from China and Japan (LaCroix 7). The number of the Chinese steadily grew, reaching almost 22,000 people of Chinese origin at the end of the 19th century. At first, they had poor living conditions and their personal rights could not be granted due to a small number of translators. The language barrier was not the only issue, as they "found themselves completely dependent on the plantation for all food, shelter, and medical needs" (MacLennan 133-134). Having finished their contracts, the Chinese moved into towns and formed communities, often intermarrying with the locals and contributing to the first mass diversification of race in Hawaii (Nordyke and Lee 200).

Then, a group of forty Japanese contract workers arrived in the 1860s and formed the second Asian group to permanently settle in Hawaii. Their population increased to more than 61,000 people within the next forty years. The Japanese formed a monoethnic society, refusing to intermarry due to their customs (Nordyke and Matsumoto 163-164), but they still contributed to the enrichment of the budding multicultural society with their traditions, food and beliefs.

In the late 1890s, another wave of immigrants was to arrive. The 1898's annexation of Hawaii by the US led to the industrialization and development of Hawaiian plantations, which now required even more cheap labour force. At the same time, Puerto Rico became American territory after the Spanish-American war.

The plantation owners could easily employ the already-skilled Puerto Ricans whose recently developed sugar infrastructure was destroyed by a hurricane in 1899. The possibility of work in Hawaii attracted the rural population and thus many left their motherland to improve their financial situation. As activist Blasé Souza reports in *Trabajo y Tristeza – Work and Sorrow: The Puerto Ricans of Hawaii 1900-1902*, not only did the businessmen in Hawaii promise work, but they also pledged to provide medical, educational, housing and transportation services (163).

The first Puerto Ricans came to Hawaii on 23 December 1900 after a long and tiresome journey ashore and afloat. Soon, they were employed by plantations. Within a year more than 5,000 Puerto Ricans arrived and settled on the Pacific islands. At first they were religiously discriminated by the Japanese, who ridiculed the Puerto Ricans' reluctance to nudity in the plantation bathhouses stemming from their Catholic faith. The Japanese could not understand the Puerto Ricans' behaviour, so they labeled them as 'dirty' and refused to integrate (Souza 169). Despite the initial difficulties, Puerto Ricans blended into other cultural groups of Hawaii via intermarriage (Souza 171).

High migration rates in Hawaii lasted until the Great Depression, when the sugar industry collapsed and most plantations were closed. However, the immigrants and their families stayed and continued their work in the weakening plantations, which were irrevocably closed in the 1990s. In his podcast *Hawai'i: The Legacy of Sugar*, journalist Al Letson describes a remnant of plantations present in Hawaiian food. Due to the mixing of cultures, the workers created a meal eaten in the fields suiting all, called the Zip Pack. It is composed of ingredients of various origin (fried chicken, teriyaki beef, rice and fish) and to this day it arouses a feeling of nostalgia for a 'better past,' as the former workers come to reunions and enjoy the plantation meal.

This idealization of culture mixing might seem surprising concerning the hardships suffered by workers throughout the existence of sugar plantations, although it might be the sign of the human need to preserve only the positive elements of the past in collective memory. Nevertheless, the plantation era is perceived in positive terms, with the focus on the integration of representatives of various cultures. In the 21st century, Hawaii remains the state with the biggest number of multiracial citizens, as around 24% of its inhabitants have foreign ancestry (Krogstad). The influx of foreign workers and the growth of the population number has undeniably contributed to Hawaii becoming the most inviting and accepting tropical destination in the world.

Puerto Ricans, on the other hand, do not share the Hawaiians' optimistic mindset. They are still deeply influenced by the economic emigration dating back to

the beginning of the 20th century and the collapse of the sugar industry in the 1950s, although its reasons are still a puzzle for various scholars (e.g. Ayala or Bridgman). Puerto Rico might be a US unincorporated territory, but the national government rarely interferes, leaving the population to the local government which imposes laws harmful to its economy (Bridgman et al).

After the closure of plantations, poverty intensified, reaching 46.1% in 2015 (“New Census Data on Puerto Rico”). Most Puerto Ricans migrated to the mainland and constitute the second-largest Hispanic group in the US. In 2017, the island was hit by two hurricanes, which destroyed the already weak economy and underdeveloped infrastructure, causing \$780 million of losses. Investments are now transferred to the most urgent expenses, as most farms and factories have to be rebuilt (Robles and Ferré-Sadurní). In contrast with Hawaii, whose economy soars due to the development of tourism and the available labour force, Puerto Rico has neither a concrete agenda aimed at economic progress and security nor enough skilled people to transform the political, educational and social situation.

Before the 1980s, few would appreciate the power of sugar as a crucial factor contributing to demographic and social transformation. Without the product, there still would be natural disasters in the Caribbean area and Hawaii would remain a group of tropical islands on the Pacific Ocean, but their respective social structures would differ from the ones in 2017. Had the plantation workers not received prospects of employment, Hawaii might have not become a tropical, multicultural paradise and many Puerto Ricans would have stayed in their homeland, contributing to the improvement of the financial and political situations. The two directions of the development of the former sugar giants derive from historical, economic and social circumstances inseparably linked to sugar production. The examples of Hawaii and Puerto Rico prove that sugar is not a simple sweetener; it is a commodity that has the power to transform the inherent nature of societies.

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